

SHIFTING POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN WEST BENGAL: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

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Introduction

India's relations with neighboring Bangladesh have remained in constant flux since the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from power in August 2024. Apart from occasional political problems, longstanding unresolved issues pertaining to border management, water sharing, and evacuation of 'illegal immigrants' have been a source of continued contestation between the two countries. While these issues generally fall under the central government's policy ambit, political rhetoric and official approaches in the Indian states bordering Bangladesh also contribute to policy formulation in this regard.

Among the five Indian states situated along the Bangladesh frontier, West Bengal shares the longest border –2217 of the total 4096 kilometers–, making it pivotal in cross-border political, economic, and social interactions between the two countries. The state government's narrative on India-Bangladesh relations and unresolved issues therefore carries a natural and added weightage in New Delhi.

West Bengal has recently elected a Bharatiya Janata Party government after 15-year rule of Trinamool Congress (TMC) under Mamata Banerjee. Given a fundamental divergence between the two parties in their framing of Bangladesh-related issues, a visible shift in the state government's

policies and approaches pertaining to Bangladesh can lately be noticed as discussed in the following lines.

Water Sharing and River Management

Given Bangladesh's overreliance for its water needs on the rivers flowing from India, water distribution remains the most challenging hiccup in their bilateral relations. West Bengal shares 54 transboundary rivers with Bangladesh, including the Ganges and Teesta rivers, with later being a key source of divergence. After intense talks stretched over years, India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government had come closer in 2011 to strike a water-sharing deal with Dhaka over Teesta. Under this deal, India would have rights over 42.5 percent of the river's water; Bangladesh would get 7.5 percent; while 20 percent was to be conserved for environmental purposes.¹ But the deal was obstructed given the opposition from the TMC-led state government. The then-Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee opposed the deal for being detrimental as it could deprive the state's northern districts—Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, and Malda— of drinking and irrigation water.² Fourteen years down, Dhaka still awaits an affirmation from New Delhi for an agreement over water flow. Another critical water-sharing arrangement between the two countries— reached upon in 1996 under the Ganges water-sharing treaty— is set to expire later this year.³ New Delhi would need a nod from the West Bengal state government for its renegotiation, renewal, or replacement.

The present BJP government, led by Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari, has so far refrained from making the water dispute with Bangladesh a subject of public debate. The BJP's election manifesto and electoral sloganeering largely revolved around border management, national security, and identity-based populist rhetoric. Given the persistent diplomatic impasse between India and Bangladesh since August 2024, an immediate breakthrough over water distribution appears unlikely. However, it can be fairly assumed that New Delhi's approach on water sharing with Bangladesh would be more coordinated and aligned with a BJP government at the helm both in Center and in West Bengal. Analysts however indicate that if the government agrees to cede some of the Teesta waters rights to Bangladesh, it may carry a political cost for the BJP, especially in the northern districts of West Bengal.

¹ "Teesta Water Treaty," *The Times of India*, February 6, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/miscellaneous/teesta-water-treaty/articleshow/56119322.cms>.

² "The Problem with Teesta," *Observer Research Foundation*, June 18, 2014, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-problem-with-teesta>.

³ "Question No. 2405 Ganga Water Sharing Treaty." *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, February 13, 2026, https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha?dtl/40759/QUESTION_NO_2405_GANGA_WATER_SHARING_TREATY.

Government officials and political parties in Bangladesh were highly concerned with the TMC's government's approach over water sharing. They viewed Mamata Banerjee as an "impediment to establishing the Teesta Barrage," as evident in the congratulatory message by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) Information Secretary Azizul Baree Helal made to the BJP over the West Bengal victory. Helal was optimistic that a water sharing formula could be carved out between Dhaka and New Delhi through the support from Suvendu government.⁴

Border Management

Border security and frontier management between Bangladesh and India remains even more politically-loaded issue with divergent views from different parties. West Bengal shares a 2217-kilometer-long frontier with Bangladesh. Districts lying on both sides of the border are considered among the most densely-populated border areas in the world, with frequent people-to-people exchanges in trade, cultural, and social domains. Viewing the border management from a socio-economic lens, the former TMC government was more facilitative toward people-to-people interactions, cultural exchanges, and transboundary trade linkages. TMC leader Mamata Banerjee often advocated strong ties between her state and Bangladesh from government to public levels.⁵ In contrast, the BJP government seems more focused on a national security-oriented approach when it comes to managing borders.

The TMC government has also remained in dispute with the Central authorities over land acquisition along the Bangladesh border. Roughly 600 kilometers of the total 2217-km Bangladesh-West Bengal border remain without fence.⁶ The state government turned down the Centre's repeated demands for land allocation for fencing purpose. Mamata Banerjee maintained that, in order to get land, the Union Government should first roll back its decision to expand jurisdiction of the Border Security Force (BSF)— a paramilitary force managing borders under India's Home Ministry— from 15 to 50 KMs inside the state.⁷ Despite judicial interventions, the dispute persisted till Mamata's last day in the office.

⁴ "BNP leader Azizul Helal welcomes BJP's Bengal win, flags Teesta deal and India-Bangladesh relations," *The Times of India*, May 6, 2026, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/the-narrative-election-special/news/bnp-leader-azizul-helal-welcomes-bjps-bengal-win-flags-teesta-deal-and-india-bangladesh-relations/videoshow/130842683.cms>.

⁵ "Cultural, linguistic ties trump economic, trade links: Mamata on Bangladesh-India relations," *The Daily Star*, June 23, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/cultural-linguistic-ties-trump-economic-trade-links-mamata>.

⁶ "Fencing on Indo-Bangladesh Border," *Press Information Bureau*, August 20, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2158419®=48&lang=2>.

⁷ "Land for border fencing not an issue, Centre must roll back BSF jurisdiction expansion rule: Mamata Banerjee," *The Hindu*, February 5, 2026, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/west-bengal/land-for->

On the contrary, the BJP fought election peddling the discourse of better border security and proactive surveillance. Beside pledging modern surveillance systems for land and river borders, the BJP also announced it would allocate land for border fencing within first 45 days of assuming power. Once in government, the BJP Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari moved to transfer the required land. In the first phase, barbed fencing was planned for 18 kilometers of the acquired land while BSF outposts were to be constructed on another 9 kilometers. The Central government is on board and is contributing in fencing expenditure along with the BSF.⁸ These measures indicate complete alignment between the state and Central governments in their policy approaches vis-à-vis border management.

Bangladeshi authorities have certain reservations on the way India is managing its borders with the country. The friction intensifies particularly from a humanitarian perspective as the Bangladeshi officials blame Indian border forces of extrajudicial killings of Bangladeshi people living alongside the border. Following the Suvendu government's measures to fence borders, Tarique Rehman's advisor on foreign affairs M. Humayun Kabir vowed that Bangladesh and its people "were not afraid of barbed wires," nor would the government sit and watch killing of its people along the India border.⁹

Dealing with 'Infiltrators'

In India's northeastern states bordering Bangladesh, 'infiltration' has emerged as the single most important political issue for the BJP. In this context, the term 'infiltrator' refers to undocumented residents of these states having Bengali genesis. Bangla-speaking Muslims in Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar states have remained a prime target of this campaign by Hindu nationalists. The BJP has already exclusionary constitutional measures such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and National Register for Citizens (NRC), which apparently aim at regulating citizenship documentation and expelling all those failing to prove their roots in India. But in practice, they mostly affect the Bengali-origin Muslims residing in India through generations. While opposing these measures, Mamata Banerjee tried to champion her party as the advocate of peace, brotherhood, and Muslim

border-fencing-not-an-issue-centre-must-roll-back-bsf-jurisdiction-expansion-rule-mamata-banerjee/article70595408.ece.

⁸ Ridhi Suthar, "Border Fencing and National Security: India's Strategy Along the Bangladesh Border.," *Impact and Policy Research Institute*, June 18, 2026, <https://www.impriindia.com/insights/policy-update/border-fencing-and-national-security-indias-strategy-along-the-bangladesh-border/>.

⁹ "Bangladesh doesn't fear barbed wire: Adviser Humayun," *BSS*, May 11, 2026, <https://www.bssnews.net/news-flash/386208>.

rights in West Bengal.¹⁰ In return, the BJP repeatedly blamed Mamata government of facilitating illegal immigration.¹¹

The BJP's election campaign in 2026 state polls revolved around “*Detect, Delete, Deport*” rhetoric i.e., finding out illegal immigrants, deleting their name from voting rolls, and expelling them to Bangladesh, as evident from the party manifesto and election speeches by its top leadership.¹² As the BJP showcased ‘infiltration’ as a threat to socio-economic resources and cultural identity of the state, the TMC downplayed it as divisive political tactic by the Hindu nationalist party. TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee even went to the extent of labeling Prime Minister Modi himself as the ‘biggest infiltrator’.¹³

Following the footprints of the Assam state government, West Bengal's new Chief Minister also ordered to set up detention centers for ‘illegal immigrants’ just three days after assuming power.¹⁴ In less than a month in power, the Suvendu government claimed to have returned 4800 illegal immigrants to Bangladesh.¹⁵ This way, the populist rhetoric peddled for years by the BJP appears to take a practical shape in West Bengal.

The way the BJP government is dealing with ‘immigrants’ issue carries natural implications for the India-Bangladesh relations. So far, the Bangladeshi authorities have maintained a cautious restraint while linking the expulsion campaign with West Bengal's internal politics. Zahedur Rahman, an advisor to the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Tarique Rehman, rejected the notion that these

¹⁰ “Will not accept CAA, NRC, Uniform Civil Code: Mamata Banerjee,” *The Economic Times*, April 11, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/west-bengal/will-not-accept-caa-nrc-uniform-civil-code-mamata-banerjee/articleshow/109212813.cms>.

¹¹ ‘Amit Shah Accuses Mamata Banerjee of Facilitating Illegal Immigration; Bengal CM Asks for HM's Resignation’, *Deccan Herald*, 30 December 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/westbengal/amit-shah-accuses-mamata-banerjee-of-facilitating-illegal-immigration-bengal-cm-asks-for-hmsresignation-3847014>.

¹² Bharatiya Janata Party, West Bengal. *Bhoroshar Shopoth: Assembly Election 2026*. Kolkata: Bharatiya Janata Party, West Bengal, 2026. Accessed August 31, 2026. <https://api.bjp.org/files/inline-documents/Bhoroshar-Shopoth-EN-WB.pdf>.

¹³ “Mamata calls PM Modi ‘Biggest Infiltrator,’ vows to protect Bengal's rights ahead of polls,” *The Economic Times*, March 22, 2026, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/west-bengal/mamata-banerjee-labels-pm-modi-as-biggest-infiltrator-at-eid-celebration-vows-to-safeguard-bengals-rights-ahead-of-elections/articleshow/129728540.cms>.

¹⁴ South China Morning Post, “India orders new deportation centres days after BJP election victory,” *South China Morning Post*, May 25, 2026, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3354785/india-orders-new-deportation-centres-days-after-bjp-election-victory>.

Mahwish Hafeez, “‘Detect, Delete and Deport’: India's Holding Centers and the Expulsion of Bengali Muslims,” *ISSI*, July 3, 2026, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/IB_Mahwish_July_3_2026.pdf.

¹⁵ “4,800 illegal immigrants sent to Bangladesh from holding centres, 836 awaiting deportation: Bengal,” *Hindustan Times*, June 7, 2026, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/4800-illegal-immigrants-sent-to-bangladesh-from-holding-centres-836-awaiting-deportation-bengal-cm-101780852969775.html>.

expulsions were part of a concentrated campaign by New Delhi to fuel tensions with Dhaka.¹⁶ This restraint, however, might not persist if the issue endures.

Bottom Line

With first ever BJP government in West Bengal, the state's political contestations appear shaping part of India's relations with Bangladesh. A comparative analysis of the political sloganeering, popular discourses, and policy approaches of the present and former West Bengal governments indicates diverging views on issues pertaining to Bangladesh. While the Mamata-led TMC government from 2011 to 2026 was a staunch advocate of preserving transboundary waters for domestic uses, the incumbent BJP government has so far remained cautious on water distribution with Bangladesh. On the issues of border security, cross-border exchanges, and illegal infiltration, however, the Suwendu government seems translating electoral rhetoric into policy actions on a fast pace. With a broader alignment in political approach and policy direction between the BJP's Central as well as state governments, New Delhi is expected to adopt more coordinated and sustained strategies on the unresolved issues with Dhaka.

India's indifference to Bangladesh's repeated calls for an equitable water-sharing, halting border killings, and formulating a bilaterally-agreed mechanism to deal with illegal immigration reflects New Delhi's broader disregard to concerns of small neighbors. The measures aimed at border management and discriminatory expulsion of Bengali-origin Muslims from West Bengal may add a layer to the ongoing wave of cold ties between India and Bangladesh.

¹⁶ "Swift resolution is expected to push-in issue: PM's Adviser," *Prothomalo*, June 10, 2026, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/lr4qs1u02e>.